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Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY QUITO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9194
INFO AMEMBASSY LIMA
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AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 QUITO 5950

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, EC
SUBJECT: THE PRESENT POLITICAL SITUATION IN ECUADOR

REFS: A) QUITO 4056; B) QUITO 4269; C) QUITO 4717 NOTAL

1. SUMMARY: POLITICAL ACTIVITY PEAKED WITH THE AUGUST STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS IN GUAYAQUIL AND QUITO. THE GOVERNMENT SUCCESSFULLY AND EASILY MET THIS CHALLENGE AND EMERGED FROM THE ENCOUNTER STRONGER AND MORE CONFIDENT THAN BEFORE. THE REGIME SEEMS SECURE. NEITHER LEFTIST NOR RIGHTIST NOR DOMINATED BY NATIONALISM, IT HAS NO CLEAR IDEOLOGICAL DIRECTION. RATHER IT TENDS TO SUBORDINATE IDEOLOGICAL MATTERS TO PRACTICAL ONES. THIS NEW SELF-CONFIDENCE AND STABILITY COMBINED WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S NON-IDEOLOGICAL POSTURE OFFERS THE OPPORTUNITY TO NEGOTIATE ON THE FISHERIES ISSUE WITH
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SOME CONFIDENCE IN THE REGIME'S STAYING POWER AND ABILITY

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TO DELIVER. END SUMMARY

2. DURING THE SUMMER OF 1973 THE ECUADOREAN POLITICAL SITUATION SHOWED CONSIDERABLE SIGNS OF LIFE. THE RESTORATION FRONT AND OTHER POLITICAL GROUPS WERE ACTIVELY CHARGING THE GOE WITH MISMANAGEMENT, CORRUPTION AND DISTORTION OF THE COUNTRY'S LEGAL SYSTEM THROUGH THE SPECIAL TRIBUNALS AND WERE DEMANDING AN EARLY RETURN TO CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT. THEY RECEIVED SOME EDITORIAL SUPPORT - PARTICULARLY WITH RESPECT TO A RETURN TO CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT. THE ONLY POLITICAL PARTY TO SUPPORT THE GOVERNMENT WAS THE COMMUNIST PARTY, BUT EVEN IT QUALIFIED ITS APPROVAL BY POINTING OUT THAT THERE WAS CONSIDERABLE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT IN PERFORMANCE.

3. THE SERIOUS AND GENERALIZED STUDENT DISTURBANCES REPORTED IN GUAYAQUIL 852 AND IN REFS B AND C, AND THE ATTEMPTS OF THE NATIONAL TEACHER'S UNION (UNE), THE CONFEDERATION OF ECUADOREAN WORKERS (CTE), AND SOME ELEMENTS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY TO EXPLOIT THEM ADDED A NEW, VOLATILE ELEMENT TO THE INCREASINGLY ACTIVE POLITICAL SITUATION, AND THE GOVERNMENT FELT SUFFICIENTLY THREATENED TO CRACKDOWN ON THE STUDENTS AS WELL AS ON THE POLITICIANS. SOME ARRESTED POLITICIANS AND STUDENT LEADERS WERE CONFINED IN THE ORIENTE WHERE THREE FRONT POLITICIANS REMAIN. OTHERS WERE WARNED THAT FURTHER POLITICAL ACTIVITY WOULD NOT BE TOLERATED. THIS CRACKDOWN WAS SUCCESSFUL, AND IN RETROSPECT IT APPEARS TO US THAT THE STUDENT DISTURBANCES IN AUGUST WERE THE CREST OF THE SUMMER POLITICAL WAVE.

4. THE GOVERNMENT REPRESSION, WHICH WAS NOT VERY EXTENSIVE NOR SEVERE, WAS SUFFICIENT TO END NEARLY ALL POLITICAL ACTIVITY; AND THE GOVERNMENT EMERGED FROM THE EXPERIENCE MORE SECURE AND SELF-CONFIDENT THAN BEFORE. THIS NEW SECURITY AND SELF-CONFIDENCE ARE ILLUSTRATED BY THE REGIME'S PROMULGATION OF A NEW AGRARIAN REFORM LAW ON OCTOBER 9 (A HIGHLY CONTROVERSIAL AND POLITICALLY CHARGED SUBJECT), AND BY ITS ANNOUNCED INTENTION TO FREE IN DECEMBER, 1973, THE THREE FRONT POLITICIANS CONFIDENTIAL

CONFINED IN THE ORIENTE.

5. WHY SUCH LIMITED REPRESSION SHOULD HAVE ACHIEVED SUCH IMPRESSIVE RESULTS DEMANDS EXPLANATION. IN OUR VIEW THERE ARE THREE REASONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT'S SUCCESS:

A) THE POLITICIANS ARE NO TIGERS. THEY HAVE NEVER SHOWN MUCH INCLINATION TO TAKE SERIOUS PERSONAL RISKS, AND

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MOST OF THEM ARE NOT TOTALLY COMMITTED TO A POLITICAL
CAREER. THIS INCLINATION IS STRENGTHENED BY THE VIEW
THAT ALL REGIMES ARE RELATIVELY TRANSITORY AND THAT,
THEREFORE, RISK TAKING IS NOT NECESSARY TO SECURE
POLITICAL ADVANTAGE IN THE LONG RUN.

B) ECUADOREAN POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL GROUPS HISTORICALLY
TEND TO FISSION RATHER THAN FUSE. EFFECTIVE COOPERATION
IS RARE -- THIS IS ONE REASON WHY THE FRONT ATTRACTED SO MUCH
EARLY ATTENTION. BUT THE HISTORY OF THE FRONT'S FUTILE
EFFORTS TO PUBLISH A MANIFESTO IS A GOOD EXAMPLE OF THE
INABILITY OF ECUADOREAN POLITICIANS TO ACT TOGETHER.
BRIEFLY, THE MEMBERS OF THE FRONT NEVER WERE ABLE TO
AGREE ON THE MANIFESTO'S CONTENTS SO IT HAS NEVER BEEN
WRITTEN. THE ORIGINAL TARGET DATE WAS EARLY JUNE 1973.
AS THE RESULT OF THE FRONT'S FAILURE TO UNITE MANY
POLITICIANS ON ANY AGREED UPON WRITTEN PROGRAM, IT HAS
LOST INFLUENCE AND IS TODAY A SHADOW. THIS FAILURE HAS
DAMAGED NEARLY ALL POLITICAL GROUPS BECAUSE IT HAS EXPOSED
THEIR FUNDAMENTAL WEAKNESS WHICH THE MILITARY GOVERNMENT
HAS NOT FAILED TO POINT OUT: THEY ARE SMALL SPECIAL INTEREST
GROUPS UNABLE TO SUBORDINATE THEIR PAROCHIAL INTERESTS
TO A GREATER GOAL. HOW THEN CAN THEY BE ENTRUSTED WITH
THE GOVERNANCE OF THE COUNTRY?

C) FINALLY, BOTH THE GOVERNMENT AND THE POLITICIANS ARE
OPERATING IN AN AMBIANCE OF POLITICAL APATHY. THIS WORKS
FOR THE REGIME AND AGAINST THE POLITICIANS. THERE APPEARS
TO BE NO GREAT POPULAR INTEREST IN POLITICS AND NO POPULAR
LEADER TO GENERATE IT OR WILLING TO TRY.
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9195
INFO AMEMBASSY LIMA
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AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL

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6. THE MOST IMMEDIATE POLITICAL ISSUE IS INFLATION WHICH IS PRESENTLY RUNNING AT THE RATE OF 16 PERCENT OVERALL AND 26 PERCENT FOR FOOD AND BEVERAGES (FIRST NINE MONTHS OF 1973 AT ANNUAL RATE). THE GOVERNMENT RECOGNIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS ISSUE AND HAS ENCOURAGED IMPORTS, WITH GOOD EFFECT IN NON-FOOD ITEMS. IN THE CASE OF FOOD, WHERE DOMESTIC PRODUCTION IS SHORT OF DEMAND AND IMPORTED FOOD PRICES HAVE SOARED DURING THE PAST YEAR, THE GOVERN-MENT HAS TRIED TO RETAIN THE POLITICAL INITIATIVE THROUGH WIDELY PUBLICIZED EFFORTS TO CONTROL PRICES DIRECTLY. IN OCTOBER THE GOE INTRODUCED A HEAVY SUBSIDY ON IMPORTED WHEAT TO PREVENT A SHARP RISE IN FLOUR PRICES. SINCE THESE MEASURES HAVE BEEN INADEQUATE TO PREVENT FAR GREATER THAN NORMAL INFLATION, THE GOE IS NOW CONTEMPLATING A GENERAL WAGE INCREASE, AS A MINIMUM FOR GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, EARLY NEXT YEAR.

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7. APATHY, OR PERHAPS MORE EXACTLY POLITICAL IGNORANCE, ALSO STEMS FROM THE RUGGEDNESS OF THE COUNTRY AND THE RESULTING POOR COMMUNICATIONS. FOR EXAMPLE, A RECENT SURVEY OF SOME CAMPESINO VILLAGES IN IMBABURA PROVINCE REVEALED THAT ONLY 35 PERCENT OF THOSE QUESTIONED KNEW WHO THE PRESIDENT OF ECUADOR WAS, AND 40 PERCENT DID NOT KNOW THE NAME OF THE COUNTRY IN WHICH THEY WERE LIVING. (INDEED, 13 PERCENT THOUGHT THEY LIVED IN SOME OTHER COUNTRY, AND SOME THOUGHT THAT ECUADOR WAS THE NAME OF A BUS COMPANY).

8. NOT ONLY IS THE GOVERNMENT BENEFITTING FROM APATHY AND A LACK OF SERIOUS POLITICAL COMPETITION, BUT IT ALSO IS ENJOYING SOME SUCCESSES OF ITS OWN. ITS PETROLEUM POLICY HAS RESULTED IN GREATLY INCREASED REVENUES (PETROLEUM REVENUES WILL RISE FROM $25 MILLION IN 1972 TO ABOUT $140 MILLION IN 1973), AND HAS BEEN MANAGED SO AS TO INCREASE ECUADOREAN SELF-RESPECT. FOR EXAMPLE,

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THE DECISION TO PLACE THE NEWLY FORMED LATIN AMERICAN ENERGY ORGANIZATION'S HEADQUARTERS IN QUITO HAS BEEN HAILED BY THE GOE AS "CONSOLIDATING ECUADOR'S PRESTIGE" AS HAVE THE RENEGOTIATION OF MOST FOREIGN OIL COMPANIES' EXPLOITATION CONTRACTS AND THE ADMISSION OF ECUADOR TO OPEC AS AN OBSERVER.

9. THE GOVERNMENT HAS ACHIEVED FOREIGN POLICY SUCCESSES WHICH ALSO CONTRIBUTE TO PRESTIGE AND SELF-CONFIDENCE. THE MOST OBVIOUS OF THESE WAS THE ELECTION OF LEOPOLDO BENITES AS THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNGA. BUT NUMEROUS HIGH LEVEL OFFICIAL VISITS HAVE ALSO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS IMAGE, AND THE IMPENDING ARRIVAL IN EARLY DECEMBER OF PRINCESS ANNE WILL PUT THE ULTIMATE TOUCH ON THESE ACTIVITIES.

10. THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN A MORE BASIC SENSE AS WELL: IT HAS GIVEN THE COUNTRY A PERIOD OF CALM AND RELATIVELY GOOD MANAGEMENT UNEQUALED IN RECENT MEMORY. THESE CONDITIONS PLUS THE IMPACT OF PETROLEUM HAVE LED TO A PERIOD OF ECONOMIC PROSPERITY. WE EXPECT THAT REAL ECONOMIC GROWTH WILL EXCEED 10 PERCENT THIS YEAR, AND BUSINESS AND INVESTOR CONFIDENCE SEEMS GOOD. THIS PROSPERITY, OF COURSE, IS ITSELF A FACTOR CONTRIBUTING TO CALM AND GOVERNMENT STABILITY.

11. PRESIDENT RODRIGUEZ' STYLE OF GOVERNMENT ADDS TO THIS ATMOSPHERE OF STABILITY. HE IS NOT GIVEN TO ERRATIC ACTIONS; HIS SPEECHES ARE NOT EXCITING AND TEND TO STRESS THE NEED FOR ORDER AND DISCIPLINE TO PERMIT DEVELOPMENT; HE IS A GOOD POLITICAL TACTICIAN

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AND RULES THROUGH A PROCESS OF CONSENSUS WHICH MINIMIZES INTERNAL GOVERNMENTAL DIFFERENCES AND WHICH HE HAS USED TO ISOLATE AND ELIMINATE HIS OPPONENTS IN THE PAST. FURTHERMORE, HE AND OTHER MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT ARE CONSTANTLY TRAVELING THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, AND THIS EXPOSES THEM TO THE REALITIES OF THE COUNTRYSIDE AND GIVES THEM THE BENEFIT OF THE IMAGE OF HELPFUL, INTERESTED PATRONES.

12. IN OUR OPINION THE GOVERNMENT TURNED AN IMPORTANT CORNER THIS SUMMER AND IS NOW MORE STABLE AND SELF-CONFIDENT THAN BEFORE. POSSIBLY AS A RESULT OF THIS NEW SELF-CONFIDENCE, THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN MAKING FEWER OF THE MISTAKES WHICH ANGERED MANY ECUADOREAN INTEREST GROUPS IN THE PAST. FOR EXAMPLE, IT IS NOW PROMULGATING LEGISLATION IN A MORE RATIONAL FASHION AND
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AFTER RATHER EXTENSIVE CONSULTATION WITH AFFECTED GROUPS. THE PROCESS INVOLVED IN ISSUING THE AGRARIAN REFORM LAW AND THE WORK ON THE FISHERIES LAW ARE GOOD ILLUSTRATIONS OF THIS TREND. IN THE PAST IT OFTEN FAILED TO HOLD SUCH CONSULTATIONS AND GOT INTO SERIOUS BINDS (PARTICULARLY WITH LABOR) AS A RESULT.

13. AT PRESENT, THE REGIME LOOKS SECURE TO US. THERE ARE FEW RUMORS OF PLOTTING AMONG THE OFFICER CORPS, AND NO IMMEDIATE DIFFICULTIES CAN BE SEEN ON THE HORIZON EXCEPT RISING PRICES. THIS PROBLEM HAS NOT REACHED SERIOUS POLITICAL PROPORTIONS YET, AND THE GOVERNMENT IS AWARE OF ITS IMPORTANCE. THE ONLY OBVIOUS FACTOR WHICH COULD UNRAVEL THIS CALM SIUATION SUDDENLY IS THE SUDDEN DEATH OR INCAPACITATION OF THE PRESIDENT. IN MANY WAYS THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THIS ADMINISTRATION IS HIS, AND HIS SUDDEN DEPARTURE COULD CREATE CONFUSION AS TO THE SUCCESSION AND DIRECTION OF THE GOVERNMENT. BUT AS FAR AS WE KNOW, THE PRESIDENT IS HEALTHY.
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9196
INFO AMEMBASSY LIMA
USCINCSO
AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL

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14. IN THE FUTURE, THE PROBLEM OF PRICES, IF UNRESOLVED, CAN BE A CHRONIC POLITICAL PROBLEM. IN THE LONGER RUN, OTHER POTENTIALLY DESTABILIZING FACTORS ARE AGRARIAN REFORM AND CORRUPTION. THE PRICE PROBLEM IS TECHNICALLY DIFFICULT TO HANDLE AND CAN BE EXPECTED TO REMAIN WITH THE GOVERNMENT. WITH LITTLE FLEXIBILITY IN ITS SMALL INDUSTRIAL BASE, ECUADOR WILL INEVITABLY EXPERIENCE MORE INFLATION DURING THE PRESENT ECONOMIC BOOM THAN IN THE PAST. THE GOE WILL PROBABLY HAVE TO PERMIT WAGES TO RISE, AS A MINIMUM IN POLITICALLY SENSITIVE QUITO AND GUAYAQUIL, TO AVOID AN EROSION OF REAL INCOME AMONG MIDDLE AND LOWER INCOME GROUPS. THIS IN TURN CREATES A DANGER OF INSTITUTIONALIZING A WAGE-PRICE SPIRAL, AS IN OTHER LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES. WE ARE NOT CONFIDENT THAT THE GOE CAN HANDLE HIGHER INFLATION WITHOUT POLITICAL CHALLENGES RESULTING.

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15. AGRARIAN REFORM MAY BE DESTABILIZING IN THE LONG RUN BECAUSE IT CAN LEAD TO RAPIDLY RISING EXPECTATIONS AND BECAUSE IT WILL CERTAINLY CREATE IMPORTANT POLITICAL PROBLEMS WHICH WILL BE DIFFICULT TO MANAGE THROUGH CONSENSUS POLITICS. FURTHERMORE THE LARGE DISCRETIONARY POWERS GIVEN TO OFFICIALS TO IMPLEMENT THE REFORM WILL

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INEVITABLY GENERATE SOME CORRUPTION. AND CORRUPTION IS ANOTHER FACTOR WHICH CAN CREATE PROBLEMS IN THE LONG RUN. IT CAN MAKE THE PROCESS OF GOVERNMENT OVERLY EXPENSIVE AND INEFFICIENT AND THIS IN TURN CAN GENERATE DEMANDS FOR CHANGE. (IT WAS ONE OF THE FACTORS IN THE LAST FALL OF VELASCO-IBARRA). WHILE THE COMING AGRARIAN REFORM IS ONE NEW POTENTIAL SOURCE OF CORRUPTION, THE EXPANDING ILLEGAL TRADE IN COCAINE IS ANOTHER, MORE IMMEDIATE ONE. THE EMBASSY HAS SOME REASON TO BELIEVE THAT THE FOB VALUE OF SHIPMENTS OF REFINED ECUADOREAN COCAINE TO THE US MAY AMOUNT TO $35 MILLION ANNUALLY. SUCH A LUCRATIVE, ILLEGAL TRADE EXISTS OF NECESSITY IN PART ON CORRUPTION.

16. DIRECTION OF THE GOVERNMENT: THE MILITARY GOVERNMENT DOES NOT HAVE ANY PRONOUNCED IDEOLOGICAL DIRECTION. IT CANNOT BE DESCRIBED AS LEFTIST OR RIGHTIST AND NATIONALISTIC SEEMS INADEQUATE. RATHER IT SEEMS TO TAKE A PRACTICAL OR TECHNICAL VIEW OF THINGS. THIS MAY EXPLAIN WHY IT IS NOT OVERLY ACTIVIST AND SEEMS SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE. THE SUBORDINATION OF IDEOLOGY TO PRACTICALITY IS WELL ILLUSTRATED BY THE GOVERNMENT'S HANDLING OF ITS BILATERAL TERRITORIAL DISPUTES WITH PERU AND THE US. IN BOTH CASES, THE GOVERNMENT HAS TRIED TO SEPARATE THE ISSUES IN DISPUTE (WHICH HAVE STRONG NATIONALISTIC OVERTONES) FROM OTHER ASPECTS OF BILATERAL RELATIONS THUS NOT ALLOWING NATIONALISM TO CONTROL ITS POLICY. ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PENCHANT TO SUBORDINATE IDEOLOGY TO PRACTICALITY IS THE NEW AGRARIAN REFORM LAW. THIS LAW IS THE MOST BASIC SOCIAL LEGISLATION YET ADOPTED BY THE MILITARY GOVERNMENT. IT IS NOT COUCHED IN IDEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE AND IS AIMED AT THE PRACTICAL GOAL OF INCREASING AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION. THE IDEOLOGICAL OBJECTIVE OF THE LAW IS TO MINIMIZE SOCIAL EXPLOITATION WHILE ACHIEVING INCREASED PRODUCTION. THE PRIORITY OF THE FIRST OBJECTIVE IS CONFIDENTIAL

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SHOWN BY THE FACT THAT THE LAW SETS NO LIMITS TO THE SIZE OF HOLDINGS, DOES NOT PROMISE MASSIVE LAND REDISTRIBUTION, AND STRESSES ORDERLY, PLANNED, AND GRADUAL IMPLEMENTATION.

17. WHEN THE MILITARY CAME TO POWER IN FEBRUARY 1972, PRESIDENT RODRIGUEZ SAID THAT MILITARY OFFICERS WOULD NOT BE REQUIRED TO SERVE IN NON-MILITARY POSITIONS FOR MORE THAN TWO YEARS AND THAT SUCH SERVICE WOULD NOT PREJUDICE THEIR MILITARY CAREERS. NOW THAT THE TWO YEAR PERIOD IS COMING TO AN END, NUMEOUS PERSONNEL CHANGES INVOLVING OFFICERS SERVING AT SENIOR AND SECONDARY LEVELS IN THE GOVERNMENT CAN BE EXPECTED. IF AND WHEN THESE CHANGES TAKE PLACE, IT MAY BE POSSIBLE TO ESTIMATE THE FUTURE

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DIRECTION OF THE GOVERNMENT.

18. SIGNIFICANCE TO THE US: THE FACTS THAT THE PRESENT
GOE SEEMS FAIRLY NON-IDEOLOGICAL, STABLE AND CONFIDENT
AND APPEARS TO BE IN NO IMMEDIATE DANGER SUGGEST THAT,
IF WE DECIDE TO MAKE ANOTHER TRY AT REACHING AN AGREEMENT
ON THE FISHERIES PROBLEM, WE WILL BE DEALING WITH A
REGIME SUFFICIENTLY CONFIDENT IN ITSELF TO ENTER INTO
SUCH TALKS AND ONE LIKELY TO BE AROUND FOR THEIR CONCLUSION.
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